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A

VISIT TO THE CATACOMBS,

OR

First Christian Cemeteries at Rome:

AND A

MIDNIGHT VISIT TO MOUNT VESUVIUS.

BY

SELINA BUNBURY,

AUTHOR OF "PROTESTANTISM IN FRANCE," &c. &c."

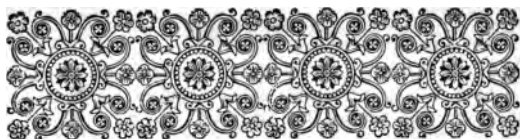
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INTRODUCTION.

THE following simple account of a Visit to the Catacombs was written at Rome in the earlier part of the eventful year of 1848. Since then Infidelity appears likely to supersede Superstition, at least in the Church of Rome. Such, by some thoughtful minds, had long been considered the probable successor of the Papacy. That it has been the lever which has now overturned that enormous anomaly called St. Peter's throne, there can be little doubt.

We may not, henceforth, have much cause to quarrel with the superstition of Roman Catholic Christendom, but we must see—and would that the church of which we speak could see—that superstition has produced its natural results, and given birth to the spirit that has already almost destroyed its parent. Strange, yet true it is, that infidelity should be the offspring of superstition. One striking example of the fact rises before us in the once pure Church of Rome. What man of reflecting and enlightened mind can contemplate the spectacle of a tawdry doll, decked in faded robes and artificial flowers, sparkling in false jewellery, and surrounded with little votive candles—and submit to the astounding dogma that he is to honour *that* as “THE MOTHER OF GOD?” Not only has the worship of the blessed mother of our Lord's human nature led to scepticism in the Church of Rome, but the degraded *manner* of that worship, the poor and paltry forms under which a divine mystery is represented, have been the grand source of that foul stream of Deism which has overspread France, is prevalent among all persons of talent in Italy, and abounds wherever the system is maintained.

Would that now, at least, in this her day, the Church of Rome would remember from whence she has fallen, and repent, and do the first works.

By the will of the Roman people the Papacy has been abolished; like the great Roman empire it succeeded, it had attained a height of power, an extent of dominion, which could not be maintained; it declined, and fell; dwindled into the mere spectre of itself, and now, even if by force of arms it be nominally replaced, has virtually ceased to exist.

When the writer of these pages first arrived in Rome, Pope Pius IX. was literally adored, as a liberal sovereign, an enlightened reformer, a good, benevolent, religious man. He had recalled the banished conspirators who now have banished him; he had opened the prison doors to State criminals who, owing to the extraordinary badness of the Roman laws, had lain in prison, even as murderers and robbers do, for long and dreary years, untried, unsentenced, and supported at the public expense. He had organised the civic guard, putting arms in the hands of the people, which were, in the end, to be used against himself. Wherever he went, acclamations followed him; flower-wreaths descended from windows upon his carriage; shouts of "Viva Pio Nono!" filled the streets; immense crowds followed him to his palace, and at last these vast assemblages were prohibited.

In the splendid Church of Santa Maria Maggiore he appeared in state to bless the people. The great piazza, or place surrounding it, was filled both with military and finely-dressed people; the splendid church within was thronged by an orderly, quiet multitude, standing as closely as possible over all the immense aisle of the beautiful edifice, leaving a passage only, lined by the Papal guards, for the Pope and cardinals to pass. A flourish of trumpets was heard, and the carriage of Pius IX. came dashing down at full speed from the Quirinal Hill, drawn by six coal-black, long-tailed horses. The trumpeters galloped before it, blowing their instruments as they rode. The guards galloped on each side and behind the carriage. In an instant it stopped, checked at full speed. The temporal sovereign had arrived at the door of the church; but the spiritual potentate was to appear within it.

In a few moments the princes and nobles of Rome, who formed his body-guard, were ranged along the aisle, their swords turned downwards, and a long train of ancient

cardinals came slowly moving on to the altar; and then, enveloped in a cloud of incense, and partly screened by two immense fans made of ostrich feathers, came the Pope, in the Papal chair, borne on men's shoulders, to be set in his place; his eyelids, as is customary, closely cast down; his fingers making the sacred sign. A god of man's device appeared to me revealed in the spectacle—one of the ancient gods of old Rome in real human flesh!

When the pompous ceremony was ended, the window of the balcony outside the Church was opened, the velvet carpet was rolled out, and forth came the Pope to bless the multitude who poured forth beneath, and that also which was formed by those who could not get admittance to the service. The troops of the line bent one knee, all other people, except a few English, fell on both; the cavalry reversed their naked sabres; a roar of cannon announced to all Rome that Pius IX. had given his blessing; and from the top of the high tower, impelled by machinery, a light cloud of incense flew up against the blue and otherwise cloudless sky, as if to announce the same fact to heaven.

I witnessed all this, and I thought of the fisherman of Galilee. But a few months passed away, and I heard that Pope Pius IX., the former idol of his people, meanly disguised, meanly carried off, had fled from their fury. The circumstances are too well known to be repeated here. We may lament that moral courage deserted a man who meant to act consistently with his own convictions of right. We may lament that, hearkening to ill-advice, he failed to show the spirit of a martyr in what he deemed to be the course of truth and of Christianity. But still more we do lament that he could not, consistently with what he believed to be due to his church, descend with dignity from the paradoxical position he held, and suffer his name to go down with honour to posterity, as that of the man who willingly dissevered the spiritual and temporal governments of Rome.

At the coronation of Pio Nono, as at that of all other popes, the master of the gorgeous ceremonies carried on a pole an open cushion, stuffed with tow, and, stopping before the Sovereign Pontiff, another officer set fire to the tow, while, as it blazed, the man who held it said—"Sancte Pater, sic transit gloria mundi." "Holy Father, so passes the glory of the world!"

The moral lesson was soon verified to poor Pope Pius IX. His glory, indeed, was as the blaze of the tow. A deceased

pope is not buried until his successor dies. It appears, at this moment, a question whether there may not be always an unburied pope in St. Peter's. Even should the present Pontiff be replaced by foreign arms (and certainly, if the French could choose their own form of government, the Romans may wonder if they cannot do so too), but even if the Popedom be forcibly re-established, it cannot, as a temporal authority, be re-established in the wills and inclinations of the people. The papal government was universally believed to be one of the very worst in the world.

For above a thousand years St. Peter's throne has remained the most extraordinary paradox on earth. It could not fall with a better man upon it; and whatever be the fate of Pius IX., the history of 1848 will, in future, prove the fact, that the anomalous character of a liberal and enlightened sovereign, and of a conscientious Pope, can never be united.

The attempt proved too difficult for the generally admitted wisdom and goodness of Pope Pius.

In committing this slight account of the first Christian Cemeteries of Rome to the press, I fancied some notice of these recent events might not be inappropriate.

Whatever little information I have attempted to give in the succeeding pages, has been designed for the less learned class of readers. I freely acknowledge that, like many others, I had adopted myself the notion that the Catacombs were merely a place of Roman Catholic superstition; and that it was the brief notice I have quoted from Mr. Murray's Hand-book, which led me to enquire into their true history. I was afterwards made acquainted with Mr. Maitland's learned and valuable work, "The Church in the Catacombs," from which any reader, whose interest may be excited by my simple sketch, can, I believe, derive the fullest information on a subject well worthy of attention.



A VISIT TO THE CATACOMBS.

THE bright sun shone warmly over the earth, on which it had only newly risen, at the early morning hour when we passed through the gate of San Sebastiano, at Rome, and drove over the ancient Appian Way, and by all its splendid remains of proud Roman tombs, to visit a place which, at the period when some of these pompous heathen monuments were raised, was most despicable in the estimation of their founders.

This place was the Catacombs ; those vast subterranean excavations by which the whole country in the vicinity of Rome is undermined, and which, during the ages of persecution, were at once the tombs, abodes, and churches of the "Saints," to whom St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans was addressed.

The progress of the Christian religion at Pagan Rome is indeed surprising ; opposed as it was by the strongest impediments which the pride and power of men could present against it. "The saints of Cæsar's household" is a remarkable expression, used by St. Paul in reference to Roman Christians actually about the person of Nero, the first imperial persecutor of the Church : and the same apostle thanks God, that the faith of the Roman Christians was even then "spoken of in all the world."

It is most interesting to trace out this infant church in its underground cradle, for so the Catacombs may justly be termed, and see it in a state that appears to depict a continuation of the New Testament, or apostolic time.

This place, to which the name of Catacombs was first applied by the early Roman Christians,—a title

since appropriated to all similar subterranean passages,—had its origin in sand-pits dug in the well-known Campagna di Roma, or desolate tract of country adjoining Rome, for the purpose of obtaining the tufa (a species of sandy volcanic rock, of which the soil is chiefly composed), and which was much used in building for the purposes of cement.

It is supposed, that the doctrines of Christianity were at first promulgated among the persons employed in these pits, a class of men that might in modern times answer to the description of railway excavators, who, when converted to Christianity, and liable to persecution, took refuge themselves in the haunts with which they were familiar, and showed their retreats to their brethren; and on the walls of the Catacombs are found paintings which show that such men, though of the lowest class of the Roman people, were not lightly esteemed by the Christian community.

These paintings represent men dressed in the style of the lower classes of working people, but in some instances displaying the embroidered cross on their dress as the symbol of their profession of Christianity, and employed in excavating a hanging rock, from which a lamp was suspended. The pickaxe, and other instruments used in excavating the rocky beds for the dead, or perhaps the hiding places for the living, are also introduced. Thus these sand-diggers, who were among the Romans “called to be saints,” were probably the means whereby God provided a refuge for His suffering people.

There is also reason to believe that Roman soldiers, who embraced Christianity, were sentenced to work in these pits as a punishment. The splendid baths of Diocletian, the remains of which almost overpower by their greatness the mind of the thoughtful wanderer, are traditionally said to have been built by materials procured from compulsory Christian labour. But whatever controversy the Roman Catacombs may have given rise to, it can, without controversy, be asserted, that they have become the means of exhibiting to the full grown Church of Christ the interesting

evidences of its early state, and of proving that even in its infancy the promise began to be fulfilled—"Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world." In Rome, destined to act so great, so awful a part in that Church's future history, a cradle for those whom the Lord had chosen out of the world was provided, even beneath the ground over which their opponents trod in pride and power; and a receptacle afforded for the ashes of the martyrs who had been "faithful unto death," and who, with others more peacefully "fallen asleep in Jesus," left their tombs as a testimony to ages, and ages yet to come, of the truth of that religion for which they suffered, bled, and died.

We deplore the fact that superstition has followed the steps of piety, and by rendering these martyr bones an object of adoration, caused them, virtually, to replace the idolatry for rejecting which the martyrs died. We cannot help believing that, were departed spirits endowed with such a power, these slaughtered saints of ancient Rome, on beholding their hidden graves brought to light, and modern Rome exhibit their relics to adoration, would cry aloud, "See thou do it not! I myself also *was* a man!"

Unhappily, these superstitions of a later age have rendered us too indifferent, or too distrustful, as to the remains of an earlier one. Our research, even at the Catacombs, might be checked at the threshold, because superstition has so deeply encumbered the exterior. But if we penetrate these encumbrances, we find the religion of the New Testament, in its faith, patience, and hope, tangibly brought before us, and feel that the receivers of the Epistles of Paul, and Peter, and John, have rested in the caverned earth around us. And if that very earth, as well as the bones it held, became sacred to a degree that surpassed the limits of veneration merely, we have abundant proof, in the history of the ancient people of God, of the proneness of the human heart to idolatry.

From the first century to the fourth, these Catacombs formed the Christian burying-place of Rome, but in the commencement of the third, they changed

their primitive aspect, and were greatly enlarged and adorned. During the period of the fall of the Roman empire, and the troubles and misfortunes which distracted the city, they appear to have been disused, and were finally forgotten, until, so lately as the sixteenth century, they were opened to the wonder of the Christian world, their tombs explored, their relics distributed, not among the Churches of Rome only, but among those of all Roman Catholic Europe, the tombstones and monuments ranged in the splendid museums of that city of art, and their inscriptions and symbols made the subject of learned antiquarian discussion.

In the palace of the Popes, in the splendid museum of the Vatican, may now be seen the simple and touching epitaphs which marked the graves of the first Roman Christians. "In peace, and in Christ," is a not uncommon one of these; and in most cases, the Christian name merely, as if they had belonged to some who had no name, great among men, to bequeath to posterity. These epitaphs are generally badly spelled, and expressed in language from which it might be conjectured that, in few instances, they related to the higher, and more educated orders of society. Yet, there they are now in the proud Vatican, the palace in which art, and learning, and taste, have bestowed their treasures; whereon pride, and luxury, and pomp, have stamped their names!

Strange, and in some degree revolting, as it is, to minds which cherish a reverence for the dwelling-places of the dead, to view this array of preserved yet rifled tombs, it is evident that Rome has adopted the only means of lastingly preserving her ancient monuments, by thus transporting every portable relic into the securer asylums of her noble museums. The Gallery of the Vatican, which is almost wholly devoted to monuments and inscriptions, and therefore styled the Galleria Lapidaria, is 331 yards long. On entering it, the visitor finds ranged along the left side, the treasures of the lowly Catacombs, the early Christian monuments, inscribed with

words, or bearing symbols, which mark the faith and hope of the believers, who made their graves, as some had spent a portion of their lives, in dens and caves of the earth, while opposite to them, are ranged those of many Pagan Romans, to whom that faith and hope were foolishness. In Murray's well-known "Hand-Book for Travellers," the account given of this gallery is brief, and I may be excused for copying nearly all that is said on the subject.

"It is impossible to imagine a series of more interesting illustrations of the first ages of Christianity, whether we regard them as proofs of the funeral rites, and religious symbols of the early Christians, or estimate their value in connection with the history of the church, and the chronology of the consuls during the fourth and fifth centuries. The errors of orthography and grammar, noticed in the Pagan inscriptions, are still more striking in those of the Christians. They show the rapid decline of the Latin language, and sometimes mark the periods when matters of faith were introduced. The inscriptions are frequently very touching; the influence of a purer creed is apparent in the constant reference to a state beyond the grave; which contrasts in a striking manner with the hopeless grief expressed in the Roman* monuments. The representations which accompany the inscriptions are generally symbolical; the most frequent are the well-known monogram of Christ, formed of the Greek letters X and P, the fish, composed (that is the word) of the Greek epigraph, signifying Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour. The vine, the dove with the olive-branch; the palm, and the sheep.† The Christian

* Both are *Roman* monuments; this word should therefore be read Pagan.

† It may be well to observe, in explanation of the above, that the practice of using symbols on tombs was a heathen one, which of course the Roman Christians had been accustomed to. As Christians, the symbol was changed, or had an allegorical reference to Christian truths. The palm, as an emblem of triumph, was supposed to indicate a martyr's tomb. The sheep signified an allusion to the Good Shepherd, but the

bas-reliefs* of the fourth and fifth centuries are taken from the history of the Old Testament, and from the Life of the Saviour previous to the crucifixion. The representation of the Godhead does not occur on any monument which is referred on good evidence to the four first centuries, and the subject of the crucifixion is so rarely met with, that it would seem to have been purposely avoided, for at least two centuries later. The virgin and child is supposed to have been introduced in the sixth century for the first time, as a distinct composition. A careful examination of these monuments is an appropriate and instructive study after a visit to the Catacombs."

I visited the gallery, however, before going to the Catacombs, and I am inclined to think that, having done so, rendered my visit to the latter more interesting: but more than one visit is necessary, in order to gain real information from these monuments.

About two miles from the gate of San Sebastiano, on the old Roman way, called the Via Appia, is the Basilica, or ancient church of San Sebastiano, transformed, from being one of the Basilicæ, or ancient courts of law of the ancient Romans, into a place of Christian worship.

There, having entered the church and rang a bell, a door was opened at the side by an Augustine monk, clad in his long brown frock, girt with his cord, and with sandaled feet: informed of our desire to enter the Catacombs, he took a bunch of small candles in his hand, and forthwith attended us: first, however, pointing out to our notice the statue of the saint who has given his name to the church.

It is a recumbent figure of white marble, stuck all over with long arrows. A small lamp is always burning beside the monument of San Sebastiano. The monk told us that he was shot to death by the

Saviour's person was never represented in the first ages of Christianity, although the simple cross was constantly used.

* Or sculptures on the base of the monuments.

first persecutors of our religion. The legend of the saint is, of course, very wonderful, as it records his three resurrections to life, and other marvels; but the death of the Christian is, I believe, a matter of fact. Sebastiano was a young Roman officer, who suffered martyrdom for the faith of Christ. In after times, these wonderful tales were added to a simply interesting case, and over the spot where his body had been buried, the altar of the church now dedicated to him was raised. The exaggerated accounts of martyrologists, and other writers, should not cause us to turn from truth, because of the fiction with which it has been overlaid. Truth, we learn, may lie at the bottom of the well, and be worth the trouble of diving for. From the time of Cornelius, the centurion of the band, called the Italian band, we have many records of Roman soldiers being among the followers of Christ. Another of the martyr epitaphs of the Catacombs records the death of a young officer, "who had lived long enough when he shed his blood for Christ." His monument was erected during the persecution of Adrian; and as it pathetically says, "in fear and tears." The Church of San Sebastiano forms the principal entrance to the Catacombs, and is built over the graves of martyred men, women, and even children, who have resisted idolatry unto blood. Strange to say, it abounds with relics which present only a more singular, though it may be a purer and less ideal, form of idolatry to the votary.

Among these is a stone which is believed to have retained the impress of the Saviour's feet, when he re-appeared on earth, and at Rome, to meet St. Peter, who, through fear of death, was quitting the most wonderful place, whose history, it might seem, reached its culminating point when it claimed to be the patrimony of the humble fisherman of Galilee. On that spot, or precisely on that stone, outside the gate of San Sebastiano, the Saviour is said to have met his apostle, preparing to fly from a Roman persecution by the Appian Way. St. Peter exclaimed, "Domine, quo vadis?" or, in English, which we know St. Peter

did not speak, "Lord, where goest thou?" To which our blessed Lord is reported to have returned the reproving answer—"I go to Rome, to be crucified again." St. Peter, struck with shame, turned back to the city, and there met the death he is commonly supposed to have suffered. A little Christian church is built on the spot where tradition says the meeting took place; but the stone with the marks of the Saviour's feet, was laid up among the treasures of San Sebastiano's sacristy. That little church is called by the curious name of "Domine, quo vadis?"

Being thus obliged to see and to hear much that a person not inclined to be "too superstitious" turns away from with pity, it is, I think, well to visit the Catacombs with a mind previously prepared by a visit to the Lapidarian Gallery, and by a knowledge of the early history of the church, or otherwise it is to be feared such legends as this might convey a different impression of the place.

Lighted by our glimmering tapers, for we each held one, and guided by the monk, we descended into this vast house of the dead, which, during the times of suffering and persecution, was also made a dwelling-place for the living. A more chilling receptacle for the former, a more frightful abode for the latter, can scarcely be conceived. The immense extent of these caverns, reaching as far as Ostia, sixteen miles from Rome, and extending, it is said, more than twenty miles around; their utter darkness, the open graves cut in tiers in the crumbly rock, the long intricate galleries, running in all directions, and *honey-combed* into cells for the dead, which have been mostly rifled of their bones—some yet retaining the pulverised remains of what once was such, and others still closed up by their stone slabs—the very aspect of the dull, dark, sandy rock in which these numberless narrow houses for the dead are cut, tier above tier, many of them children's tombs—all this fills the mind with a solemnity which might amount to horror, did not history come to brighten the gloom with a voice from *the past*, repeating the glad words, "all these died in

the faith." "In peace, and in Christ," so says many a tomb-stone.* The monk passed on through galleries in which, unguided, one could easily be lost, and into which I urged him to lead us as far as we could go; but merely the entrance to them is now, in general, allowed to be seen. The galleries, branching in all directions, form an intricate and curious labyrinth. They are formed in three stories, communicating by short flights of steps cut in the rock, and are all lined with graves.

We entered an open space, or sort of square chamber: and it was with a sense of emotion, at which some might smile, that I found myself in one of those first, and yet undoubted places of worship, where, in her "troubled times," the prayers of the church were wont to be made.

Previous to the age of Constantine, that is to say, previous to the establishment of Christianity as the religion of Rome, no Christian church is known to have been erected in that city, though assemblies were held in rooms appointed as places of Christian worship.

I had, shortly before this, seen St. Peter's in its wonderful greatness. I had seen, too, more romantic if less impressive, St. Mark's at Venice; and here, in the same land which had reared these gorgeous or stately fanes, I stood within the first church of Rome! More comfortable perhaps to the fisherman of Galilee, than the mighty temple now dedicated to him; but certainly, more suitable to the genius of Pope Leo X.

The first churches of the Catacombs—for there are even here, more modern and more elaborate ones, with altars placed over the graves of martyrs—are merely open spaces forming a square or oblong chamber, into which lead the winding passages before mentioned; the walls are perforated for tombs, and there are tombs also in the floor.

* I am aware that these cemeteries, having been used in later times as a general burying-place, this expression is liable to limitation.

Here, then, among their dead, the first Christians of mighty Rome offered their prayers to the living God ; and here, enclosed in darkness, found access to the fountain of light. Here, doubtless, St. Paul's epistle "to all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints" *—has often been read, and has refreshed the weary soul, strengthened the trembling heart, or confirmed the wandering faith.

It is conjectured, and perhaps truly, that these churches were only used as such during the seasons of persecution, when the caverns were thronged with refugees from the wrath of man directed against the faith of Christ.

Their numerous entrances, which opened to many parts of the vast and dreary Campagna, and the intricacies of the winding and dangerous passages, rendered them an easy and safe refuge for the well-instructed, and a difficult place of pursuit to their enemies, who were ignorant of the locality. Wells and springs are found to have been used here, a circumstance by no means unlikely ; but to one of these is given the title of St. Peter's Font, added by the traditionary zeal of later days, which would assert that the apostle used it for the purpose of baptism. The wells were useful in preserving life, and that baptism was performed in these sepulchral vaults, we may, even while rejecting the tradition of St. Peter's Font, most steadfastly believe.

But how vain appears all controversy concerning the rites and ceremonies of the new-born Christian church, when we stand within such a place as this ; and recollect that such a struggling and tempest-tossed state, was, almost universally, the state of the church of Christ, when first left alone in the world, forewarned by His words of her portion therein—"In the world ye shall have tribulation."

The sand-diggers, some of whose race are supposed to have been among the first converts to Christianity, appear to have fulfilled a part in the church in some

* See Romans i.



degree answering to that of our sextons and grave-diggers. Abraham bought a grave for Sarah in the cave of Machpelah, and here, too, in the caverned ground of Rome, a grave was probably bought and paid for.

These fossers, or sand-diggers, are by some said to have formed the lowest order of the clerical body. The retreats made known by them to their persecuted brethren, are believed to have been alluded to by the orator Cicero, as having, in his time, afforded a refuge for thieves and murderers. As converts multiplied, or as persecution raged, the fossers were employed in enlarging these retreats, and in excavating the tombs with which they were so plentifully furnished. In times of repose, it may be conceived that attachment to the abode that had yielded them shelter would continue; and the fossers were employed likewise in adorning this singular subterranean region.

The fact of these vast subterranean churches having been the abode of Christians in a time of general or individual persecution, is well authenticated. That they did not in all cases afford an effectual asylum, is known by the martyrdom, even within the subterranean church, of some of those primitive Christians whose names, and; alas! whose relics, are still preserved. The danger, however, of entering the Catacombs without guides, must have proved, in general, a safeguard to the refugees, one of whom is said to have lived for eight years in the gloom of this living tomb, and after all to have suffered death for his religion.

An interesting story, too, is told of another Christian, who, during a concealment here, was ministered to by two Pagan children, whose parents, though averse to Christianity, continued faithful friends to the Christian, and sent him, by these little ones, the provisions or tidings he required. It may be supposed that the suffering Christian did not let them come and go without telling them of the Saviour whose arms received, and whose accents blessed such little ones as they were. From concern for the little

messengers, he began to feel greater concern for the kind parents, who were living without a knowledge of God. He kept the children in the Catacombs, and thus obliged the parents to come thither to seek them ; and the effect of his exhortations, or instructions, was seen, when, on a future day, the whole party shed their blood as martyrs for Christ.

The sceptic has denied the violence, or disputed the causes, of Roman persecution, on the ground that the Romans were not a persecuting people. Such, indeed, was the truth, and in the New Testament we have evidences of their indifference rather than intoleration. The cause of their animosity to a sect pronounced by Pliny to be harmless, must be traced to the amazing rapidity with which were diffused the doctrines of Christianity ; to the fact that the proud Romans beheld, with mortification and fear, the Gods of their old mythology falling away before the influence of a despised, and to them unintelligible, creed.

Diocletian believed that his zeal had exterminated the Christian sect, and had a column set up to commemorate the triumph. That imperial persecutor was, indeed, the last ; for the religion that he believed to be quenched in blood, sprang up with tenfold strength, and triumphed ; until, strange to see, the images of the saints filled the niches of the Pantheon, and a temple, dedicated to a heathen goddess of Rome, was consecrated to the Virgin Mary !

It must, however, be admitted that in most cases, the Romans did not extend their animosity to the Christians *beyond* the life of the victims—not showing the brutal ferocity which professing Christians of later times have shown in mangling and insulting their lifeless bodies.

Pilate, the Roman governor, appears to have made no objection to the request of Joseph for that of our Lord, and his countrymen appear generally to have acted in the same way by those of his followers. The early Christians, far from disregarding the rites of sepulture, paid extreme attention to them, and performed them with a care unknown to us, using in the

interments the richest perfumes ; and in cases of martyrdom, anxious friends would peril their lives to obtain the bodies of the dead. Thus they who died within the mighty Coliseum—

“ Butchered to make a Roman holiday ! ”

A spectacle to men and angels—a prey to savage beasts—found a last resting-place within the Catacombs—“ in peace, and in Christ.”

A departure from primitive simplicity may be traced even in these under-ground regions. It is singular to see this subterranean progress of error. But it is not until after the liberation of the Christian religion—politically speaking—and its establishment by the Emperor Constantine, as that of the Roman empire, that the progress of error becomes apparent.

This change from the early simplicity of apostolic times, is in some instances traceable on these monuments ; but they are free from the greater errors into which Rome has fallen in her later days.

There is no request to pray for the dead, as is so common on the tombstones of Pere la Chaise, or any other Roman Catholic cemetery. The word “ sleep,” is almost always used instead of death ; and a pious ejaculation, or benediction, inscribed, such as—“ May God refresh thee,” “ May you live in God,” &c. Marking a different faith, and a different mind, from that of the poetic benediction or prayer of a Pagan tomb, “ May the earth be light upon thee ! ”

A simple cross almost always marks these tombs ; that cross was the despised symbol of a despised faith ; their enemies were those whom the apostle calls, “ the enemies of the cross of Christ : ” and, while it endangered their lives to display it, it was evidently regarded by them as it had been by St. Paul, when he said, “ God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Jesus Christ, my Lord.” That cross, moreover, expressed their profession as Christians ; and thus on their tombs it supplanted the heathen symbols which would otherwise have been there, and

marked out a Christian's tomb. But this was a simple cross, not a crucifix ; no figure was depicted upon it : it was a symbol merely, and not an object of prayer, of reverence, or of worship. In later years, the lamb came to be represented at the foot of the cross ; but it was not till the eleventh century that the practice of representing a suffering Christ upon the cross came to be common. And when the sacred form came to be described upon it, idolatry became almost inevitable, whatever may be said to the contrary. The thing seen, is then the thing adored ; the object bowed down to, is the object worshipped. Who can see, as I have seen in the mystic twilight of evening within the mighty St. Peter's, a priest in his white robes kissing the foot of the great bronze statue which, though called by the name of the apostle, history declares to have been that of the heathen god Jupiter—and a poor layman kneel, silent and motionless, with adoring looks, before it, and not feel that that statue is in itself as much, if not rather a thousand-fold more, an object of adoration and worship than it was when filling its niche in the Pantheon of Pagan Rome ? That Pantheon, once dedicated to Jupiter and all the gods, has passed, with scarcely more than a verbal alteration, into a temple dedicated to the Virgin and all the Saints. The niches which the statues of the gods of heathen mythology filled in that most beautiful building, are now occupied by those of the saints.

It is interesting to trace the process by which even error advances. Thus we see a simple cross used as a Christian symbol ; then we see the lamb, another symbol, described at its foot ; and then, in the ninth century, we find a council of the church decreeing that the human figure of the suffering Redeemer, should be painted, or sculptured, and affixed to that cross !

The imagination of the master painters of the world has since been exercised on the subject. Our blessed Lord, and his sufferings, have been depicted by every grade of genius ; but we can readily imagine

that at first considerable embarrassment must have been felt, as no portrait nor even description was ever left to the world, of Christ, of his mother, or of his apostles. Ingenuity contrived a means of getting over the difficulty ; tradition made St. Luke a painter, and readily produced likenesses supposed to have been taken by him : a sect, too, of professing Christians, pretended to have multiplied copies of a portrait of Christ, painted for Pontius Pilate. Added to these, was the famous handkerchief of St. Veronica ; a handkerchief, alas ! which to this day, constitutes one of the most singular and most splendid of the exhibitions at St. Peter's, where it is stately displayed to an adoring crowd.

I have seen copies of this in painting in foreign galleries ; but in the picture, St. Veronica appears holding the handkerchief on which is impressed the face of the Saviour ; the brow crowned with thorns. The story says, that a pious woman, named Veronica, wiped that sacred brow, as he bore his cross up Calvary ; the impress of the face and features remained on the cloth ; thus the likeness was preserved, but the handkerchief is believed to have been preserved also, with the original impression, and is shown at St. Peter's as a most sacred relic.

There are no traces of the Virgin Mary to be found in the Catacombs : and it is a strong evidence of all absence of divine honours being paid to her at an early period of Christianity, that the Pagan Romans, who so frequently accused its professors of worshipping a man, and a malefactor, never accused them of worshipping a woman, or of holding a woman in undue veneration. Who that now gazes on the wonderful Madonna of Raphael,* but, while feeling the genius that inspired the artist, feels also that the being thus portrayed is designed to represent an inspired one ? How much higher a place does the Madonna engage in the thoughts, and even in the affections of the beholder, than the little unconscious-

* In the Dresden Gallery.

looking infant she holds in her arms. The Saviour in his childhood is like any other child, the mother is like no other woman.

For more than three centuries after her death no representation of the Virgin existed. When the first rude attempts at this were made, far from aiming at the inspired-looking and glorious production of the great painter's pencil, the more truthful, Biblical artist, represented a female entirely veiled, merely appearing as the guardian, of the holy child. And in such a portraiture, did not truth and sentiment more agreeably harmonize ?

Thus a full view of the different ideas prevailing in the church respecting one who was indeed highly favoured among women, may be obtained from the representations made of her in two distinct epochs.†

In the monuments of the Catacombs, too, we read nothing in praise of martyrs, and find no petitions for their prayers; but just above these underground remains of the three or four first centuries, how much do we in the nineteenth find of all this! As we walked on through the irregular and intricate labyrinths, ascending or descending the steps by which the three stories are connected, and holding high our glimmering lights, which but faintly penetrated the gloom, one of our party who had a taste for geology, and was bent on making examinations very different from those I was intent upon, collected some specimens of tufa, and in doing so, accidentally drew from an open grave a portion of nearly pulverized bone. Having a strange fancy to retain it, along with the other specimen with which it was mingled, and yet unwilling to commit an act of unlawful depredation, he requested me to ask the monk if he might carry the crumbled bone away with the earth. The monk replied, for his information, that there would be no use in doing so, as it was not a sacred bone ; or, as he expressed it in Italian, "It was not in veneration." It had not been

† That is to say, in comparing Raphael's compositions in the sixteenth century with the ruder designs of the fourth.

the bone of a martyr. A few centuries before, when a traffic in relics and in saintly bones was carried on to a great extent, our friend's undesigned acquisition might have classed him among the thieves whose trade it was to purloin the bones of the departed and sell them as relics.

Is it marvellous, then, that the Emperor Julian, surnamed the Apostate, though it is clear he never apostatised, being always in heart a Pagan, should address such language as this, blasphemous as it is, to his Christian subjects :—"Instead of many gods, you worship not one but many wretched men. At what you have done, adding new dead to your first Dead One, who can express sufficient disgust ! You have filled every place with sepulchres and monuments." Like other errors, martyr-worship advanced gradually. This error taking its rise in an undue admiration of martyrdom, progressed to praying by the graves of martyrs ; to imputing greater efficacy to such prayers ; to deeming them a means of grace ; to holding feasts around the graves, in imitation of the heathen feasts of the dead ; until, just as was the case with the people of Israel, idolatry was substituted for reverence ; and, in the fourth century, this practice became productive of gross licentiousness. The error of martyr-worship began indeed to develope itself plainly, soon after the last persecution. Its rise is clearly traceable to an undue estimate of the blessedness of martyrdom. The martyr was believed to have done something for God, to have acquitted himself in a manner that left him a claim on the divine favour. The words of their Lord were forgotten by Christians—"After ye have done all, say, we are unprofitable servants." But in the earlier stages of Christian suffering, the merits of a martyr, or rather of a faithful confessor,—that is of one who suffered without yielding, but without being actually put to death—for some we know had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, of bonds, and imprisonments,—only allowed him the privilege of interceding with the church on behalf of his weaker brethren, for the

relapsed, or for those who had been excommunicated for unfaithfulness or sin, and were subjected to severe penance. This privilege led to another abuse: it became exaggerated, and the right of intercession with the church, or with his fellow-men, came to be transferred into the right of interceding with God; so that the mediation of departed saints with God, who has only appointed one Mediator between Him and man, was the error that proceeded from a laudable practice of the early church. Prayers then came to be addressed to martyred men, in terms little differing from those used in divine worship.

In the Catacombs, it is true, that there are now altars built over the grave of a martyr, a saint, to whom they are dedicated, but these are not of ancient date. Our monk told us that the graves of martyrs had been known by the inscriptions, and such relics had then been removed to sanctuaries. It would appear, however, that the monk was mistaken, as comparatively few of the inscriptions recorded the fate of martyrs. They speak only peace and gentleness, and are silent as to injuries and oppression. The symbols, too, supposed to designate the tomb of a martyr, such as the palm branch, &c., have been matters of controversy. The body of Moses was probably hidden, lest the idolatrous Israelites should worship it; and the early Christians, had they foreseen the coming errors of the Church, might have wished the place of their tombs unknown.

The vase, or cup, either enclosed in the grave or placed beside it, or represented on the stone, was in later ages supposed to have been filled with the blood of the martyred; but the more probable, and pleasing allusion may have been to the sacramental wine in the Lord's Supper; more especially as the words, "Drink, and live!" could only have reference to the declaration which was esteemed a hard saying by many who heard it, and is indeed still so—"Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath everlasting life."

Blessed hope! for which the martyrs bled and died,

reckoning that the sufferings of this present life were not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed. How brightly was the reflection of that hope shed over the gloom of the Catacombs !

We left them, and emerging again into day went on a little further to see a prouder Pagan monument—the beautiful and enormous tomb which once held a feeble woman's dust.

The tomb of Cæcilia Metalla has stood for very nearly 2000 years in its massive yet elegant solidity ; but it is empty, the sarcophagus is removed—the dust is not. “in veneration.” The tomb itself was, in the fourteenth century, converted into a fortress by Pope Boniface, and what now remains to tell of “the Lady of the dead?”—nothing but the name of Cæcilia Metalla.

“This much we know—Metalla died—

The wealthiest Roman's wife—behold his love or pride.”

The green ivy waved over the broken top of the vast circular building ; I stood within it, and gazed down into the empty mausoleum, meant to contain a little dust, but capable of being made a fortress !—and I thought of the Christian inscription of the Catacombs, “In peace, and in Christ.” So near are these inscriptions in distance upon earth, so widely are they separated in faith and hope.

The monuments preserved in the Vatican, even those of the earliest ages, might tend to remove some singular prejudices from purely Protestant minds, which, from a just horror of Popery, extend somewhat of that horror to the sacred symbol of our redemption—“The cross of Christ ;” and, in some cases, regard it even with disgust or contempt, instead of reverence. From these monuments it is clearly seen that while the crucifix, that is to say, the representation of our blessed Lord's dying figure attached to the cross, was never used in the first ages of our faith—the cross itself, as a symbol and badge of that faith, was constantly used, revered, and gloried in, even when

its exhibition brought suffering, and may be death. Now, alas! it has come to be considered as the symbol of Popery rather than of Christianity; and the Protestant who marked his tomb, like the early Christians, with the sign of the cross, would be deemed a Papist. But the error has sprung from a good principle on our side, and from a lamentable abuse on the other.

Let us yet hope better things. The Church at Rome in her infant days was faithful and pure—she owned but one Mediator between God and man; she was far apart from pride, and pomp, and power; from war and thirst of dominion; from bigotry, tyranny, and cruelty.

Emancipated from her sufferings, she came from the hiding place of the Catacombs, to be gradually exalted to the high places of earth, to attain a pinnacle of pride, and an extent of spiritual and temporal power at which the mightiest trembled. She forgot her first estate, and, like Judah of old, “followed her own inventions;” while sitting as a queen enthroned on the prostrate minds of men, she stretched the usurped sceptre of her sway over the extent of Christendom.

We think of the days of her struggling youth, when she walked in humility and fear—when she contended with the powers that would rule and crush her faith, and came off a conqueror—when she resisted “gods many, and lords many,” and was firm against idolatry even unto death, resisting the persecution she learned to inflict—and, while we walk through the Catacombs of Rome, we only pray that she may repent, and do the first works.





A

MIDNIGHT VISIT TO MOUNT VESUVIUS.

"GREAT and glorious are thy works ! oh, Lord God Almighty !" said the Psalmist, and never have I been more impressed with all the feeling which the exclamation indicates, than when I stood, in the calm of a midnight hour, in the desolate and singular region of Mount Vesuvius.

Familiar as we all must be from childhood with descriptions of this often-visited volcano, my own visit far exceeded any ideas I had previously formed ; for we did not see Vesuvius in that quiescent state in which so many travellers have ascended its cone, and even descended a portion of its crater ; we saw it in a remarkable and splendid state of activity.

When first approaching Naples, on the road from Rome, we beheld a white column of smoke rising lightly into the pure atmosphere. "See," said an artist from Rome, who accompanied us, "there is Vesuvius." We regarded it with a strong sense of disappointment. It was curious, indeed, to see the smoke, when we knew it proceeded from internal fire ; but without that knowledge it would not have presented any extraordinary spectacle.

The day had been intensely hot, and, tired of a long journey, we longed, on our arrival at Naples, for the shades of evening to refresh us. They came,

and I went out upon a pleasant stone platform, on which opened the window of my room at the top of the house, to enjoy the freshening air and delightful view of the bay, over which the softened light of retiring day was yet lingering, and blending gradually with the clearer one of the rising moon. Then first I beheld the fire of Vesuvius—a dark red spot on the mountain side, issuing from an orifice near to the crater, but not from the crater itself. It was not a blaze, but a deep burning light, seen through and behind the mists which followed the departure of the sun.

I ran to call my friends to see it ; some delay took place in finding them, and when I came back to the platform, an exclamation of wonder and delight broke from us all. That dark red spot had apparently spread out and flamed on into a wide long stream, descending the entire length of the great cone, and reaching to the plain or base beneath it. We afterwards watched it as it appeared gradually to unfold, lengthening, and widening, and brightening, as the strong sunlight faded, until I saw its long, deep, fiery shadow rest over the clear blue waters of the bay.

Instead of a white column of smoke, we soon saw a pillar of fire rising up from the crater, high into the quiet air, and through it shot up innumerable sparkles, displaying a curious description of natural fireworks, dispersing as by the force of an internal explosion, and falling in a glowing shower on the outer sides of the crater, which soon presented the appearance of a heap of fire. From time to time, large pumice-stones, red hot, were flung up from the burning and unquiet centre : we saw them fall, roll down the sides of the crater, and lose their brightness. It was a source of pleasure and of interest to me, which I can scarcely express, to sit on that pleasant platform and watch the working of that ever-burning mountain ; and, in the stillness of the warm moon-light nights, I have lain upon my simple bed and watched it, gazing upon it from the window as I lay, *ever at work*, yet ever varying : while the deep,

coppery red of its shadow seemed almost to form a bridge of fire across the unbroken waters which lay between.

The beautiful aspect of Mount Vesuvius by night, as well as the intense heat of the weather, determined us to choose that time for its ascent ; indeed, we could have attempted it at no other. That night was one which I shall not forget, and I bless God, who gave me the capacity in mind, as well as in body, to enjoy it.

The form of Vesuvius is remarkable ; it has two summits, and rises in a gentle swell from the sea-shore. The lower region, or base of the mountain, presents a strong contrast to the upper. At five o'clock on a charming afternoon, we left Naples in a carriage, hoping to traverse this lower region in time to see the sun set from the more elevated one. We engaged the carriage to convey us to the Hermitage, situated at that part of the mountain from whence the real difficulty of the ascent commences ; for it is an instance of the rare facilities which our times afford to exploring travellers, that a carriage road, rather difficult but perfectly practicable, has been made upon Mount Vesuvius ; a circumstance which causes much indignation, and meets with much opposition from the numerous guides and conductors whose business it has been to supply mules, or ponies, or asses, for that purpose. The road, however, has not been formed solely for the convenience of curious travellers ; an observatory has been erected on Mount Vesuvius, and a carriage road on this account has been made up to the Hermitage, which may be said to terminate the first of the two distinct regions into which the mountain is divided.

This lower region, which we traversed in the carriage, is one of the most fertile, populous, and lovely that can be conceived : the higher is the most awful, stern, and singular that is commonly to be beheld. The first region, both on the side of the sea and inland, is covered with towns and villages ; the sites of which have been swept over by the devastating lava,

and re-edified by their persevering inhabitants. Portici, the most considerable of these, is about six miles distant from Naples, and at the foot of Vesuvius. Below its royal palace, lies buried, at the depth of seventy-feet, the ancient city of Herculaneum, the first town known to have been destroyed by the eruptions of Vesuvius.—Yet who can tell that others had not previously undergone its fate.

We entered its buried, but partly re-opened theatre, still underground and still in darkness. How strange, how interesting a sight ! Its passages choked up with lava tell a fearful tale. The seats for the spectators are still to be seen, but where are they who filled them ? The stage, too, is to be seen as it was when the great Romans crowded to its performances :—but nearly two thousand years have passed since its actors were swept away—suddenly, as in a moment, as a dream when one awaketh, so did the scene disappear—the scene of life.

Of the whole buried city, little more than this excavated theatre is now re-opened. What was opened has been closed up, for the safety of the town built over it would be endangered by further explorations ; and Herculaneum, which tradition says, was founded by the hero Hercules, remains entirely choked up by lava, cemented by a mixture of water, and buried beneath the shower of ashes which destroyed it. “It is choked up as completely as if molten lead had been poured into it.”

Pompeii, which has been so beautifully brought to light, was destroyed by cinders, with which so much water did not mingle, and which being less cemented, and more easily removed, caused the buried town to be discovered, only twelve feet below the surface. In the smaller town of Torre del Greco, the lava, which in later eruptions nearly overwhelmed it, is still to be seen ; but the love of the inhabitants for their homes, or the inconvenience of a remove, causes them to rebuild the dwellings which the volcano destroys or injures.

The whole road from Naples is, indeed, an almost continuous town.

Pompeii lies at the other side of the mountain ; we

visited it the following day. But it forms too interesting a subject to be introduced thus incidentally, except so far as it may appear almost incumbent on a visitor to its terrible destroyer, Vesuvius, to mention its fate. The fate of Pompeii derives additional interest from the well-known fact that Pliny, the famous naturalist, fell a victim to his love of natural science, while watching the fiery deluge that for 1800 years laid that elegant Roman town under a bed of cinders.

The whole base of the mountain presents scenery of the richest, most luxuriant, and cultivated character. The most productive vines, the most beautiful orange trees, figs, pomegranates, and numerous trees and plants, which are exotic to our clime, bordered the road, and gave it additional interest; while every advancing step opened a still more charming prospect of the lovely plain from which we ascended; the fair bay, with its islands of historic and classic celebrity, and the busy city of Naples with its villas and gardens, all becoming more revealed to us from our increasing altitude, bathed in the beautiful richness of a rapidly-sinking sun.

What a contrast was this to the upper region of the mountain! A scene of perfect desolation! an immense cone, flat on the top, and formed almost entirely of ashes and cinders, which in the ascent yield to the foot that toils up it, traced on all sides by broad, black lines, the marks which the burning lava has left, and which may be distinctly seen at a great distance. There is now no vegetation—no sign of life. Nothing but the ceaseless volcano appears to be in motion.

Vesuvius has not always been ascended by travellers when it was in the excited state in which we saw it. Many persons have recorded their entrance into the crater, or at least their inspection of it, and told of the common feat of throwing stones into it. An approach to that crater on the night I speak of would have been death.

One traveller, who relates an ascent to Mount Vesuvius when it was in a tranquil state, speaks as follows: "When we reached the summit, we found ourselves on

a narrow ledge of burnt earth, or cinders, with the crater of the volcano open before us. This orifice in its present form, for it varies at almost every eruption, is about a mile and a half in circumference. We descended some way, but observing that the slightest movement brought great quantities of stone and ashes rolling down the sides, and being called back by our guides, who assured us we could not go lower with safety, nor even remain in our station, we re-ascended.

"We were near enough to the bottom, however, to observe that it seemed to be a sort of crust of brown burnt earth, and that a little on one side there were three orifices, like funnels, from whence ascended a vapour so thin as to be scarcely perceptible."

Such was the state of the crater in 1802.*

A later, though in these locomotive times, not a modern traveller, has also left us a similar description.

"When you arrive at the top, it is an awful sight; as you approach the great crater the crust on which you tread becomes burning hot, so that you cannot stand long on one spot; if you push your stick an inch below the surface it takes fire, and you may light paper by thrusting it into any of the cracks of the crust.

"Altogether it is a most sublime and impressive scene. The look down into the great crater is frightfully grand; and when you turn from the contemplation of this fearful abyss, you are presented with the most forcible contrast in the rich and luxuriant prospect of Naples and the surrounding country, where all is soft and smiling, as far as the eye can see."†

But now this crater presented to our eyes a glowing mass, on which a fiery shower was still constantly descending, forming a spectacle which, in the gloom and stillness of night, and amid the savage dreariness of the scene, was at once grand and horrific.

My anxious desire was, not to ascend the summit,

* *Eustace's Classical Tour in Italy.* † *Diary of an Invalid.*

but to get to the said stream, which I had watched with never-ceasing interest from my window : and neither the arguments, nor—I am almost ashamed to say—the entreaties, of some our party, could dissuade me from the attempt.

We left our carriage at the Hermitage—singularly mis-called,—and mounted mules, which took us along a path about three-quarters of a mile further on. The guides were provided with immense torches, perhaps eight feet long. At the spot where I dismounted these were lighted, and the glare they flung around revealed, certainly, the most singular scene I ever beheld.

A field of blocks of lava, of that grey dark colour it assumes when cold, lay beside us : ashes, cinders, and these sharp hard masses, covered the whole space up to the cone—a bare and savage looking scene ; while from the red summit the pillar of flame shot out in fitful splendour, and fiery pumice-stones of a great size descended again from the night-shadowed skies towards which they had been flung, and fell, sometimes back into the burning centre, sometimes on the outside of the glowing crater ; while glittering ashes, more like sparkles from blazing wood, dispersed a strange brilliancy over the midnight scene, and continually strewing the outer sides of the crater, rendered it one burning though not blazing mass.

It was over this lava field we had to walk. Our guide said it was impossible I could do it, and wanted to remain with me while the stouter members of our society visited the lava river in my stead. But as I saw the man would be glad of any excuse to get off the toil of an expedition he was obliged to make too often, I would not yield to him, but persuaded my friends that interested motives induced him to prevent my expedition.

I set out over the blocks of lava with a good heart, for I firmly believed a path had been tracked out through them, and would shortly be found. A delusion which probably enabled me to effect my purpose ; for had I known that I was really to walk for more

than a mile, on these sharp, hard, unsteady blocks, almost like pointed irons to the feet—up ridges, and into furrows, guided only by the fitful light of torches, for the moon had not fully risen—had I known this from the beginning, I fear I should not have continued my way, but turned back with the less reluctant guide, as I had promised to do if weary. How like is this to the pathway of life ! How should I have shrunk from tracing all its steps if the end had been known from the beginning ! Better is it to be led on in ignorance, believing only that as our day is, so shall our strength be.

Weary indeed I was, and several times ready to give up, but some little assistance, some kind solicitude, or some cheering words, again impelled me onward. In ascending Vesuvius, I am aware that ladies, and even gentlemen, need not, unless they wish it, undergo any fatigue, or make any exertion. A little money obviates all that ; and they may be carried up in a chair, or pulled up by guides, and satisfy their own curiosity at the expense only of other men's labours.

Mine, however, was a different expedition, and in this place no such assistance could be afforded. Yet was I not well repaid ; and would not the friends who had patience with me, and increased their own labours in the effort, from time to time, to lessen mine, be repaid also, if they knew the lasting enjoyment which the memory of that night has afforded ? So few are the memories of such associated expeditions which we can cherish with entirely unmixed pleasure, that one doubly feels in their review how much may the unselfishness, good temper, and kindness of heart in our fellow-beings, colour with brightness, or darken with sadness, the pictures of Nature which memory's canvass represents. At last the increasing heat told of our approach to the region of fire ; the air was sulphureous, and gave a choking sensation ; it was loaded also with smoke. The ground grew hot and hotter : we mounted a ridge of cinders, and there, at the other side, I beheld the

lava stream ; stood beside it on the brink of the bed it had tracked for itself ! It was quite a river of fire, about thirty feet broad, slowly moving on ; over the top was heard a slight fizzing sound, such as cinders make when cooling. A light smoke rose from it, but much less than might be expected. Indeed, the smoke had been much greater at some distance from it. The ground was so hot, and my feet so sore, having never found a single resting place from the sharp lava during our entire progress, that I found it impossible to stand for an instant on one spot. My shoes were almost literally burned off ; and while the gentlemen were burning the ends of their sticks, as the customary souvenir of Vesuvius, I very undesignedly brought away its memorial in a burned dress. One of my friends, catching my hand, caused me to bend over the stream to look at the lava in motion : I could only compare it to moving mud on fire ! But as I bent over it, the oppressive atmosphere, and furnace-like heat, quite overcame me ; I felt a dizziness and sense of faintness, and catching the arm of one of the guides, precipitately descended the ridge of cinders that bounded the lava stream, and hid myself from it with still more eagerness than I had sought it.

It required, indeed, some fortitude to conceal my state, or to struggle against it ; but aware of the consternation which a fainting fit on Mount Vesuvius would occasion, I was enabled to do both, and none of my party knew, and perhaps do not still know, what was the matter, while I sat on a block of lava out of sight, till the effects of the heat, suffocation, and exhaustion, in great degree passed away.

After a walk of equal toil, occupying at least an hour in returning, as it had done in going, we once more reached smooth ground : the touch of something like common earth was pleasant ; but when I saw my mule patiently awaiting my return, I was too glad to mount to my former seat, and leave the gentlemen to take their way alone to the summit of the cone, where several parties of ladies and gentlemen had preceded them, accompanied by chairs and porters, and guides

with leathern straps round their waists, by means of which a feeblér traveller, when enclosed in one of these, can be pulled up the ascent by the stronger animal.

I did not covet either the chair or the strap, I never have any fancy for being either carried or pulled up mountains ; and as they could not approach the crater, I knew they would not have so good a view of it as I had from a lower station ; at least, self-love comforted itself with such wise conclusions, as I took my solitary way back to the Hermitage.

The moon had risen in all her brightness, walking in beauty through a cloudless sky : it was about half-past one o'clock in the morning, and its undimmed presence more than supplied the absence of the wilder light of the uncertain torches which my party took with them. As their voices died away, and the shouts of guides calling to their fellows became more distant, the light of a torch moving here and there over the savage scene, only added wildness and interest to the view without dazzling my aching eyes. I was glad to find the Italian youth who was my cicerone, and noisy as all natives of Naples are, had loitered behind with a chance comrade, for I enjoyed the silence of the hour, and strange splendour of the scene, too much to like to be disturbed by such nonsense as he kept constantly addressing to his mule, to which he had given the favourite name of Maccaroni. In quiet musing, therefore, I rode along, and might, though in a slower style, have gone, like the renowned Gilpin, much farther than I wished to go ; for the mule, deserted by its master, and left by me to its own will and pleasure, took a path which was not the one that led to the Hermitage. The shouts of the noisy Italian, when he missed me from the right one, apprised me of the fact ; I met him running after his Maccaroni, whom he probably thought had equal charms for me, and was to be the partner of my flight. He guided both wanderers back, and I began wisely to reflect that meditation and musing at midnight, are not suitable to Mount Vesuvius ; an idea that was not

removed by my entrance into the court of the Hermitage, which was filled with donkeys, ponies, mules, carriages, horses, and servants, all forming a chorus of noise to which, indeed, distance was requisite to lend enchantment.

There I was joined by two of the gentlemen I had left, who, finding themselves sufficiently fatigued by their walk to the lava river, had followed me back. Thirsty and tired, we entered the Hermitage, thinking it to be, as in fact it was, an inn, which went by that inapplicable name. I was, however, surprised to find the proprietor to be a calm, respectable monk; his grave countenance, brown frock, cord, rosary, and crucifix, agreeing ill with the aspect of the place, which was incessantly occupied by parties going to or coming from the top of the mountain.

At a table in the scantily furnished room, sat a comfortable looking priest, with some bread, cheese, butter, apples, and a bottle of common wine before him. We were glad to join in his supper: he informed us that he was the chaplain who said mass in the adjoining chapel; and he smiled very good humouredly when I asked if that house were *really* a Hermitage.

"It is really a Hermitage," he replied, "and there is the hermit;" nodding his head to where the monk sat at a distance.

"A solitary?" I persisted.

"Yes!" the priest replied, with a laugh; "a solitary who is in society."

It was a singular place, and a singular scene. There were some young Germans as well as Italians present; and, so close to that flaming mountain as we were, I could not help wondering at that perfect indifference and carelessness of feeling with which we spoke of the forty eruptions known to have taken place, and the lowness of the estimate which some authors make of the number of victims in all,—not more than twenty thousand.

Our discourse was interrupted by the hermit, who, with gravity and in silence, approached the table, removed the bottle of wine, and replaced it by another,

adding also a new supply of the bread, cheese, and apples, hermit-fare for the visitors to Vesuvius. This movement we received as a hint that our part of the repast had ended. The priest withdrew, and the party broke up. For my part, I went off to the carriage, fell asleep, and forgot Vesuvius altogether, fancying myself, I believe, still in the Hermitage, until awoke by the voices of our absent friends, whose fatigue scarcely allowed them power to mount into the carriage. It was then about half-past three o'clock, and that last exertion made, it was at once put into motion, and preceded by a guide bearing a flaring torch, we began to descend on our road to Naples. Before we reached it, the brilliant sun was beaming in our dazzled and sorely aching eyes. So ended our Midnight Visit to Mount Vesuvius.

Again, in recalling its memory, does that ascription of grateful praise arise in the mind—"Great and glorious are thy works ! O Lord God Almighty !"—So great, so glorious, that small and insignificant must man appear in comparison with them. Man viewed in his mortal state ; for he is a being of yesterday, a creature crushed before the moth. But viewed in relation to his immortal destiny—oh ! there the scale of comparison changes. One of the first of poets lost sight of this, when, in the bitterness of his heart, he compared the littleness of men with the greatness of God's material works : but the believer amid the wonders of Nature's magnificence, can repeat the beautiful words—"Thou Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the earth ; and the heavens are the work of thine hands. They shall perish, but thou remainest ; they all shall wax old as doth a garment ; and as a vesture shall thou fold them up, and they shall be changed : but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail."

And, man, like his Creator immortal, shall also endure : they shall perish, but he remaineth. An inheritance that passeth not away is prepared for him, if he will prepare himself to inherit it.

The vestiges of God's love even still are visible

"in the things that are made;" but of what avail were such traces of love as these, if the sinful children of earth did not know that "God so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."







